

Message Text

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AMEMBASSY LONDON

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USMISSION USBERLIN

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AMCONSUL BREMEN

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SUBJECT: THE "LEBER AFFAIR"

REF: BONN 15397, BONN 14921

BEGIN SUMMARY: THE "LEBER AFFAIR" REFLECTS THE STRAINS AND TENSIONS WITHIN THE SPD AT LARGE (I.E., THE IDEOLOGICAL DISPUTE BETWEEN THE LEFT AND RIGHT WINGS OF THE PARTY, THE HISTORICAL PROBLEM THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS HAVE HAD IN COMING TO GRIPS WITH THE CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONSHIP, AND PERSONALITY PROBLEMS). SOMEWHAT BELATEDLY, THE NATIONAL LEADERSHIP CAME OUT IN SUPPORT OF DEFENSE MINISTER LEBER AND IT NOW APPEARS ALMOST CERTAIN THAT HE

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WILL HEAD THE HESSE "LANDESLISTE." HE REMAINS THE MAJOR

SPD SPOKESMAN ON DEFENSE MATTERS AND CONTINUES TO BE ONE OF THE LEADING SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC VOTE GETTERS. IT IS NOT CLEAR YET WHETHER THE LEFTISTS IN THE PARTY WILL HAVE ENOUGH VOTES TO PREVENT HIS RE-ELECTION TO THE PRESIDUM AT THE SPD BUNDESPARTEITAG IN NOVEMBER. WHATEVER THE OUTCOME, LEFT WINGERS IN AND OUTSIDE THE SPD WILL CONTINUE TO CRITICIZE THE SPD DEFENSE POLICY PERSONIFIED BY LEBER (A STRONG AND EFFECTIVE DEFENSE POSTURE ANCHORED TO THE ATLANTIC ALLIANCE). HOWEVER, THE MAJORITY OF SOCIAL DEMOCRATS AND THE MAJORITY OF THE POPULATION AT LARGE SUPPORT THAT POLICY. END SUMMARY

1. THE "LEBER AFFAIR" (REFTELS) IS A MICROCOSM OF THE STRAINS AND TENSIONS EXISTING WITHIN THE SPD AT LARGE: THE IDEOLOGICAL DISPUTE BETWEEN THE LEFT AND RIGHT WINGS OF THE PARTY, THE COMING TO GRIPS WITH THE CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONSHIP IN A DEMOCRACY AND THE PROBLEM OF MESHING DISTINCT (AND OFTEN DIFFICULT) PERSONALITIES WITHIN THE SPD IN AN ELECTION YEAR.

2. ON THE FIRST COUNT, GEORG LEBER REPRESENTS THE BETE-NOIRE OF THE SPD LEFT-WINGERS. AS A STAUNCH SUPPORTER OF NATO, THE DEFENSE MINISTER OFTEN APPEARS TO BE SEEKING PUBLIC DISPUTES WITH THE "PROGRESSIVE WING" OF THE PARTY. HIS DEFENSE OF ARMY INSPECTOR GENERAL HILDEBRANDT'S ATTENDANCE AT A PARADE COMMEMORATING THE FASCIST VICTORY IN SPAIN, HIS ARTICLE LAST AUGUST IN THE CONSERVATIVE FAZ, CRITICIZING LEFTISTS' ATTACKS ON US POLICY IN VIETNAM, AND HIS BACKTRACKING ON LIBERALIZATION OF LEGISLATION CONCERNING CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS WERE ALL GUARANTEED (FOR BETTER OR WORSE) TO FORCE A CONFRONTATION WITH THE LEFT.

3. THE FACT THAT LEBER'S WORKING CLASS CREDENTIALS ARE IMPECCABLE (A SOURCE OF EMBARRASSMENT TO MOST SPD LEFT-WINGERS WHO ARE THE CHILDREN OF THE BOURGEOIS), THAT HE IS AN ACTIVE, PRACTICING CATHOLIC AND, FINALLY, THAT HE IS NOT EMBARRASSED IN APPEARING "OLD FASHIONED" IN PUBLICLY WARNING OF THE SOVIET THREAT, ALL CONTRIBUTE TO THE GULF BETWEEN LEBER AND HIS OPPONENTS. THE SITUATION IS EXACERBATED BECAUSE THE HESSE SPD IS SOMEWHAT TO THE LEFT OF THE PARTY IN GENERAL, AND OPPOSING LEBER FOR THE NOMINATION AS CANDIDATE IN HIS OLD ELECTION DISTRICT WAS A YOUNG, AMBITIOUS, FORMER JUSO LEADER (KARSTEN VOIGT) WHO WAS OUT TO GUN DOWN THE OLD PRO FOR HIS SEAT IN THE BUNDESTAG.

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4. THE NATIONAL SPD LEADERSHIP, AWARE THAT SUCH IN-

TERNAL PARTY SQUABBLES WILL HURT THE PARTY AT THE POLLS
AND RECOGNIZING THAT LEBER IS STILL A MAJOR VOTE-GETTER,
BELATEDLY CAME TO HIS AID. ALL THE PARTY LEADERS, IN-
CLUDING SCHMIDT, BRANDT AND KUEHN, MADE PUBLIC STATE-
MENTS IN SUPPORT OF THE DEFENSE MINISTER. IN ADDI-
TION, THE PRESIDUM OF THE HESSE SPD ANNOUNCED THAT
LEBER WOULD BE PUT AT THE HEAD OF THE SPD "LANDESLISTE"
IN NEXT OCTOBER'S BUNDESTAG ELECTION. MINISTER FOR
INNER-GERMAN AFFAIRS, FRANKE (LEADER OF THE INFLUENTIAL

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"SEWER WORKERS" IN THE SPD BUNDESTAG FRAKTION) WENT

SO FAR AS TO ACCUSE LEBER'S LEFT WING CRITICS OF FAVOR-
ING A GDR-TYPE SYSTEM FOR THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC.

5. BEYOND SERVING AS A CASE STUDY IN LEFT-RIGHT TEN-
SIONS WITHIN THE SPD, THE "LEBER AFFAIR" ALSO POINTS UP
THE HISTORIC DILEMMA OF THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS' RELATION-
SHIP TO THE GERMAN MILITARY ESTABLISHMENT. FEW NATIONS
ARE MORE THE PRISONER OF THEIR HISTORY THAN GERMANY.
THE SPECTRE OF THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC IS OFTEN CITED WHEN
THERE IS A NEW ACT OF POLITICAL TERRORISM, AN INCREASE
IN THE INFLATION RATE, OR AN INCREASE IN UNEMPLOYMENT.
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IT IS NOT SURPRISING THAT THE PRESS (AND THE CHANCELLOR)
WERE QUICK TO PLACE THE "LEBER AFFAIR" INTO A HISTORICAL
CONTEXT.

6. IN RELEASING HIS PUBLIC STATEMENT DEFENDING LEBER,
CHANCELLOR SCHMIDT ADDRESSED THE AGE OLD PROBLEM OF THE
SOCIAL DEMOCRATS IN COMING TO GRIPS WITH THE NEED FOR AN
EFFECTIVE AND VITAL MILITARY ESTABLISHMENT IN A DEMO-
CRATIC SOCIETY. SCHMIDT EMPHASIZED THAT THE
SOCIAL DEMOCRATS HAD TO BEAR PART OF THE BLAME FOR THE
FAILURE OF THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC BECAUSE OF THE PARTY'S
TRADITIONAL ENMITY TOWARDS THE MILITARY. LEARNING FROM
ITS PAST MISTAKES, THE CHANCELLOR SAID, THE SPD HAS BEEN
SUCCESSFUL SINCE WORLD WAR II IN CREATING A FEELING OF
MUTUAL TRUST BETWEEN THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS AND THE MILI-
TARY. THIS MUTUAL TRUST, THE CHANCELLOR EMPHASIZED,
COULD BE DAMAGED BY ATTACKS ON THE DEFENSE MINISTER BY
MEMBERS OF HIS OWN PARTY. LEBER IS EXTREMELY POPULAR
WITH THE MILITARY AND THIS IN ITSELF IS A REAL ACCOM-
PLISHMENT FOR AN SPD DEFENSE MINISTER.

7. GEORG LEBER HAS NOT BEEN PASSIVE DURING THE CONTRO-
VERSY. HE CONTINUES TO WORK EXTREMELY HARD IN DEVELOP-
ING CLOSER LINKS BETWEEN THE TRADE UNIONS AND THE DE-
FENSE ESTABLISHMENT IN ORDER TO BROADEN SUPPORT FOR THE
CONCEPT OF A STRONG DEFENSE AND THE NATO ALLIANCE. HIS
EFFORTS TO EDUCATE TRADE UNION CIRCLES, WHICH HAVE TRA-
DITIONALLY HARBORED ANTI-MILITARY SENTIMENTS, COULD BE
A REAL CONTRIBUTION TO BUILDING AND MAINTAINING PUBLIC
SUPPORT FOR THE ALLIANCE.

8. FINALLY, AS IN MOST POLITICAL EVENTS, PERSONALITIES
PLAY AN EXTREMELY IMPORTANT ROLE. LEBER IS EXTREMELY
FRANK, OUTSPOKEN AND HAS A WELL DEVELOPED EGO WHICH
OFTEN MAKES HIM TOUCHY. WHILE THESE QUALITIES ARE NOT
UNLIKE THOSE OF THE CHANCELLOR (SCHMIDT AND LEBER NOT
ONLY SHARE A POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY BUT ARE ALSO FRIENDS),
THEY HAVE NOT MADE THINGS EASIER. THE DEFENSE MINIS-

TER'S AGGRESSIVENESS HAS ON OCCASION INTENSIFIED THE POLARIZATION WITHIN THE PARTY WHICH SCHMIDT WANTS TO AVOID, ESPECIALLY DURING THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN. FURTHERMORE, LEBER'S NEGLECT OF HIS ELECTION DISTRICT AS WELL AS HIS LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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FREQUENT ABSENCE FROM PRESIDUM MEETINGS HAVE DIMINISHED SOMEWHAT HIS INFLUENCE WITHIN PARTY CIRCLES.

9. GEORG LEBER DESERVES MUCH CREDIT FOR THE BREADTH AND DEPTH OF PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR A STRONG WESTERN DEFENSE POSTURE. HE HAS DEFENDED THE ATLANTIC ALLIANCE FOR MANY YEARS AGAINST THE EFFORTS (OFTEN PICKED UP AND ECHOED BY LEFTISTS IN THE FRG) OF THE SOVIET UNION TO DISCREDIT THE WESTERN ALLIANCE. THE RESULT HAS BEEN THAT WEST GERMANY HAS REMAINED ONE OF THE STAUNCHEST ALLIES OF THE US IN EUROPE.

10. IN CONCLUSION, IT IS APPARENT THAT LEBER REMAINS A MAJOR NATIONAL POLITICIAN WHO IS THE LEADING SPOKESMAN WITHIN THE SPD ON DEFENSE MATTERS. HE IS EXPECTED TO HAVE THE NUMBER ONE SLOT ON THE HESSE "LANDESLISTE" AND WILL BE GUARANTEED A SEAT IN THE BUNDESTAG AFTER THE 1976 ELECTION. HE WILL CERTAINLY FACE OPPOSITION FROM THE LEFTISTS IF HE RUNS FOR RE-ELECTION TO THE PRESIDUM BUT IT IS NOT CLEAR AT THIS POINT WHETHER THEY CAN PREVENT HIS RE-ELECTION OR NOT. WHATEVER THE OUTCOME, THE LEFT-WINGERS IN AND OUTSIDE THE SPD CAN BE EXPECTED TO CONTINUE TO CHIP AWAY AT THE DEFENSE ESTABLISHMENT AND TO CRITICIZE THE CONCEPT OF A STRONG DEFENSE POSTURE ANCHORED WITHIN THE ATLANTIC ALLIANCE. HOWEVER, THE OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF SOCIAL DEMOCRATS AS WELL AS THE MAJORITY OF THE FRG POPULATION SUPPORT THE NEED FOR AN EFFECTIVE AND STRONG MILITARY ESTABLISHMENT TO DEFEND THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC.

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